

The Common Property Resource Digest

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Greetings. This issue of the CPR Digest examines “Contemporary Analytical Tools and Theoretical Questions,” one theme from the 10th Biennial Conference of the IASCP, **The Commons in an Age of Global Transition: Challenges, Risks, and Opportunities** in Oaxaca, Mexico, with the dialogue focusing on the search for conceptual consistency.

Amy Poteete leads off the CPR Forum suggesting that methodological innovation can only improve analyses if there is agreement on concepts first. *Jesse Ribot* responds by pointing out that clarity of concepts is needed more than consistency. *Andrei Marin* takes this view a step further by offering that the lack of conceptual consensus among practitioners of various disciplines is actually a means to increase understanding of the mechanisms underlying the way CPRs function. *Nirmal Sengupta* agrees some conceptual consistency is useful, especially among basic, root concepts, yet comments that participation among scholars of differing disciplines can be an asset for attaining conceptual consistency. *Heidi Wittmer* returns us to the original theme, reminding us that one point of the theme is to move the analytical focus of CPR studies beyond the case study model. *Robin Roth* concludes the dialogue with a call for conceptual clarity as a means to strengthen analyses. The Forum is followed with “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” a poem on disciplinary fragmentation and conceptual inconsistency. **Enjoy!**

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CPR FORUM COMMENTARY

What Do You Mean By That? In Search of Conceptual Consistency

Amy R. Poteete
University of New Orleans

One of the themes for the 10th Biennial Conference of the IASCP calls for methodological innovation and introspection under the heading “Contemporary Analytical Tools and Theoretical Questions.” The theme encourages the use of methods that are relatively new to the study of common property (e.g., game theory) or have been developed relatively recently (e.g., qualitative comparative analysis based on Boolean algebra). It also promotes the use of multiple methods as a way of triangulating findings. Greater methodological innovation and sophistication offers the potential for considerable analytical progress. Yet methodological innovation can improve analytical leverage only if there is some degree of agreement on concepts. Thus, the full version of this theme encourages “theoretical syntheses of past work to clarify conceptual issues.” (See Announcements Section for info on the meeting and the call for papers.) We need conceptual consistency to communicate and make sense of our findings. At the same time, the very existence of conceptual inconsistency can be helpful, in that it prompts the probing of assumptions and meanings associated with the search for conceptual consistency.

The IASCP grew out of a multidisciplinary effort to clarify concepts used to describe property rights and types of goods. The terms “commons”

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Douglas Clyde Wilson
Assistant Editor
Alyne E. Delaney



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and “communal property” had been used to describe goods owned collectively by some defined community as well as the absence of property rights. The conceptual confusion obscured the possibility of successful communal management and provided support for policies that effectively destroyed successful systems of common property, often substituting ineffective systems of state property that in practice amounted to open access. A wide-ranging intellectual movement responded to this misleading discourse, challenging the meanings of terms used in discussions about property rights, and ultimately clarifying those concepts. Distinctions have been drawn between common property and open access, public goods and common-pool resources, and types of goods and types of property rights. The clarification of concepts, and consistent adherence to more fully specified definitions of terms, allowed scholars to recognize the possibilities for sustainable management of resources under common property as opposed to open access, to discern conditions that characterize successful development and maintenance of common property, and to raise questions about the supposed superiority of private property rights for the management of common-pool resources. It seems uncontroversial to argue that the emergence of a consensus on these concepts laid the foundation for progress in understanding relationships among types of goods, types of property rights, and management outcomes.

These successes should inspire striving for conceptual consistency in other areas. Concepts such as community, decentralization, indigenous, globalization, and participation feature prominently in current debates, and yet these terms are used to refer to very different things. Or, perhaps worse, concepts are used loosely, without explicit definition, so that it is not clear what is meant. Inconsistency in the use of concepts increases the likelihood that people will talk past each other. Use of the same terms to mean different things makes divergent conclusions more likely - not because consistent patterns do not exist empirically, but because our language lacks the precision needed to bring any patterns that do exist into focus.

Numerous factors contribute to conceptual inconsistency and make the development of consensus difficult. Disciplinary divisions, the politics of policy-making, and the rise of new but related debates present three important challenges to conceptual consistency.

Just as physical separation promotes different dialects, disciplinary separation of faculties, professional

associations, and professional journals encourages the development of discipline-specific understandings of concepts. These conceptual dialects emerge gradually and unintentionally. Refinement of concepts within disciplines decreases conceptual consistency across disciplines. Disciplinary sub-divisions only exacerbate this tendency. Although interdisciplinary programs exist, disciplinary training remains the norm, and career advancement generally occurs within specific discipline. To flourish professionally, we need to speak the language of our specific disciplines. Disciplinary training inculcates fluency in disciplinary dialects, thereby reinforcing those dialects.

I don't want to overstate these divisions. Overlaps exist, especially within the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. IASCP draws together representatives of diverse disciplines and is not the only professional

organization to do so. Interdisciplinary dialogue occurs, countering the dialect-producing effects of disciplinary separation. But it also involves an increased likelihood of miscommunication, because participants often do not recognize that they are either using the same words to refer to different things or using different words to refer to the same things. Who among us has not asked a colleague, "What do you mean by that?" Or experienced the epiphany that an apparent disagreement boiled down to a difference in terminology? Sometimes, differences in terminology reflect more significant differences, not only about definitions, but also about perspective. Exhausting though the debates about "what do you mean?" can be, the broadened perspectives that often result are well worthwhile.

Where disciplinary divisions contribute inadvertently to conceptual inconsistency, the politics of policy-making encourage loose application of concepts. International agencies promote particular types of policies or approaches to governing, often adopting a catchword or phrase to market their approach. With aid and international public opinion on the line, governments and development workers portray their own policies and

approaches as adhering to the conventional wisdom by adopting the catchword or phrase. Thus, "community-based resource management" might describe devolution of authority over a resource to a group with a history of working together to manage a resource. But the term is also used to describe benefit-sharing arrangements in which the "community" beneficiary has no involvement in decision-making and consists of people who do not identify with each other. "Participation" may involve repeated meetings with local residents to discern local



Santa Domingo, IASCP 2004 Conference venue in Oaxaca, Mexico, viewed from the Botanical Gardens. Photo: Doug Wilson.

concerns and develop strategies for addressing them through local initiative. Yet short public meetings to describe official policies also get described as "participatory." Some degree of cynicism about the motivations for such expansive application of concepts is warranted. The incentives for field officers and governments of developing countries to

appear to conform to a conventional wisdom can be quite high, even as international agencies do not even come close to having the capacity needed to check for actual conformance. Nonetheless, cynical behavior is not the only source of conceptual inconsistency in policy applications. Policy frameworks often use language vague enough to support multiple interpretations. And the agencies themselves develop multiple versions of concepts as they balance association with an international conventional wisdom with the need to differentiate themselves from other agencies. For all of these reasons, policy applications generate conceptual inconsistencies. Just as scholars grapple with differences in disciplinary dialects, they also must confront and overcome inconsistencies in concepts used in scholarly and policy circles.

Even where interdisciplinary consensus forms, as on concepts related to property rights and types of goods, its survival cannot be guaranteed. Despite the advantages of conceptual consistency, survival of a consensus may not even be desirable. Current controversies about intellectual property rights over seeds and access to information, for example, bring with them divergent

terminology. The injection of new terms and new examples into the discourse on property rights upsets the comfort of conceptual consensus. The disruption occurs, even as those studying intellectual property rights look to the conceptual framework developed by scholars of common property for insights, as David Bollier pointed out in last June's CPR Forum Commentary on the Information Commons, because the substantive concerns and assumptions differ in important ways. The conceptual distinction between common property and open access accepted the need for property rights to avoid exhaustion of a resource and promote investment in provision and maintenance. The fervor about intellectual property rights, on the other hand, reflects not only a concern with privatization of ideas and genetic content by firms, but also a suspicion that leaving access relatively unrestricted can be advantageous. We are not necessarily talking about purely open access. After all, open source software commits users to share their innovations. Participation in seed-sharing also rests on expectations of reciprocity, even if those expectations are not formalized. Still, talk about an "information commons" raises important theoretical questions. Is this a move back toward equating "commons" with "open access"? Can the distinction remain meaningful even if membership in the commons is not well-defined? By disrupting the consensus, the introduction of new topics and new voices forces reexamination of assumptions.

As representatives of diverse fields interested in diverse substantive issues, many of which have policy implications, members of IASCP deal with conceptual inconsistency on a regular basis. We need some degree of conceptual consistency to communicate effectively. Even if no consensus forms, the effort to clarify concepts stimulates the questioning, adaptation, and innovation through which learning occurs.

For Further information:

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Roe, Emery M. 1999. *Except Africa: Remaking Development, Rethinking Power*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

apoteete@uno.edu

CPR FORUM RESPONSE

Say what you Mean

Jesse C. Ribot

**Senior Associate, Institutions and Governance
Program, World Resources Institute**

In our article "A Theory of Access," Nancy Peluso and I define and elaborate a term that is frequently used but rarely defined. We did not do this in order to seek a consensus on meaning. We did it to produce an analytic framework for empirically exploring instances of benefit appropriation and explaining those appropriations within a larger social and political-economic context. Further, we did it so that studies of benefit appropriation can be conducted in a comparative manner—so that those interested in empirical analysis of this particular question can talk to each other and can build a larger body of comparative knowledge. Conceptual clarity is about internal consistency and not necessarily about consensus. It enables us to know how our ideas are similar, how they differ, and why.

Clear definitions enable us to connect theory to observation and observations back to theory—also making them practical tools for connection action to outcomes. A definition of "access," "decentralization" or "participation" should be based on our observations and assumptions about causality. Decentralization, for example, is promoted because it is believed to increase equity and efficiency and improve management. Therefore, its definition should be specific enough to allow us to know decentralization when we see it. The definition should be linked to the conditions we believe will result in the outcomes for which decentralization is promoted. This is a definition that at once carries an empirical agenda that can allow us to test the theories behind reforms and actions, and can serve as a political agenda for those who are promoting or resisting decentralization—helping to identify the elements that need to be promoted or resisted.

The definitions that people adopt, like theories, are a function of interest. They are historically and socially contingent and they are easily harnessed, co-opted and reformulated in public discourse and political

action. They reflect social positions and political agendas. The definitions people use are a great source of information on their implicit interests, their imbrication in governance and accountability systems, and their (often flimsy) theories of causality. Participation is a classic term that, in the development context, is often used to label processes for mobilizing people to implement the agendas of others. It is used for instrumental objectives of implementation rather than procedural objectives of empowerment and enfranchisement.

For example, there are now armies of participation facilitators, trained by donors, NGOs and the UN, that are foisting environmental agendas on local populations. These agenda are also themselves ideologically linked to keywords such as “biodiversity loss,” “deforestation,” “rational management,” “management plan,” and “ignorance,” whose vague definitions become levers for coercing local people to participate in natural resource management agendas that they know to be irrelevant to their own interests and that are often not justified any scientific or ecological grounds.

In the Sahel, fortunes are built on the private oligopolies enabled by quotas and licenses justified on a discourse about protecting a “fragile” environment from “anarchic” woodcutters. Why doesn’t anyone ask what the forest service and environmental NGOs mean by ‘fragile’ in a harsh zone like the Sahel where anything ‘fragile’ dried up and died long ago? Why doesn’t anyone ask what they mean by “anarchic” when illegal production patterns are no more ecologically damaging than those “permitted” by the forest service—neither of which are “organized”? Also, it is interesting to ask why so many people—foresters, environmentalists, development agents—repeat these keywords like mindless incantations? This is a serious research question about consensus formation in the absence of evidence and often in the absence of theory or clear definitions.

Words are mighty two edged swords. They can be used to clarify and obscure. As Dr. Poteete states “Policy frameworks often use language vague enough to support

multiple interpretations.” Behind which there are multiple interests. The language is often used to please or hoodwink donors and trick constituents. It is our job as researchers to clarify this obscurity—for both scientific and political ends. I agree with and deepen Dr. Poteete’s message. But, I believe that a large dose of cynicism is desirable. Language is always changing and for good reasons. We do not need consistent terminology. Indeed there are often irreducible epistemological differences among theories—and therefore definitions—that do



The Monte Alban plaza viewed from the tallest pyramid. Oaxacan archeological sites play a significant role in revealing Mexico’s past. Photo: Doug Wilson.

even admit the idea of consensus. Scholars must interrogate and specify own definitions and they must interrogate the ways others take and transform terms. Why do different actors use different definitions? How do these differences evolve? What are the material, political and cultural meanings and interests behind these choices? What kinds of

collusions, divisions, violence and coercion do such terms reflect? Consensus is not the aim. Clarity is one aim. The best we can do is to state our premises and definitions so that others can know—or think they know—what we mean.

For Further Information:

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Ribot, J.C. 2001. “Science, Use Rights and Exclusion: A History of Forestry in Francophone West Africa,” Issue Paper No. 104, Drylands Programme, International Institute for Environment and Development.

JesseR@WRI.org

CPR FORUM RESPONSE

Clinician or Meta-theorist? About Eclecticism and Consistency in Contemporary CPR Studies

Andrei Marin

Centre for International Environment and Development Studies (Noragric), Agricultural University of Norway

Professor Poteete's commentary describes some of the mechanisms and sources of conceptual inconsistency in the study of common property and underlines the importance of consistency in order to both communicate effectively and make our research more relevant. While the analysis provides a valuable perspective on disciplinary division, politics and conceptual evolution as sources of conceptual inconsistency in the CPR research, some additional points might prove helpful.

My experience with the application of the Common Property Regimes framework stems from analysing the management regimes of the common reindeer ranges in Northern Norway. This investigation was done at a time (2001) when the rangeland resources were generally perceived as highly degraded and the regime governing them as utterly ineffective. I used the paradigm provided by Political Ecology in order to interrogate and juxtapose two different discourses regarding the status of reindeer herding in the area. The "hegemonic discourse" of the government presented the situation as an epitome of the 'tragedy of the commons'. It argued for the privatisation of the ranges (currently in process) and centralised control of the number of animals grazing on these ranges "managed in principle as a common resource with open access to a large number of herders". In contrast, the discourse of the herders presented many varied causes and nuances of the downturn of reindeer herding. They associated the degradation with the introduction of the concept of 'common pasture'. Since it was common anybody could graze anywhere they wanted, which to the herders did not mean that it was "common," but rather that it was simply "free".

This is a perfect example not only of the dangers of conceptual inconsistency in reducing the strength of a scientific paradigm, but also of the political motivations and vested interests inherent in such a loose application of concepts ('a common resource with open access'). If

concepts like 'common resource' and 'open access', despite their relatively consistent and strict definitions, can be so easily used as Trojan horses for policy-making, what could be expected when politicians use 'participation,' 'equity,' 'legitimacy,' or 'sustainability'? From my experience, the use of discourse analysis provided a useful tool in identifying and exposing these inconsistencies and the rationalities behind them.

Regarding the disciplinary fragmentation and re-negotiation of conceptual consensus as sources of inconsistency, some remarks are warranted. The interdisciplinary approach used to explain, describe and clarify property rights and types of goods inside the CPR framework, is often acknowledged. Seldom, however, is it specified that this approach is inherently indicated by the very nature of the problem, as such research requires new (better and more refined) concepts, drawing on sources as varied as law and game-theory. Science as a problem-solving process relies on theory as a major link between the roles of practitioner and researcher. This problem-driven practice, common in interdisciplinary studies, often faces challenges in meeting academic rigour deriving from methodological pluralism and conceptual affiliation. This is even more evident if disciplinary division combines with the use of loose meanings, creating a feedback loop resulting in more inconsistency. This problem can be explained by the initial tendency of a CPR researcher to think as a clinician, that is to try and solve the problem directly, in a case-by-case fashion, rather than developing a theory, and then (contributing to) a paradigm. In a practical sense, therefore the loose use of terms and methodologies is the norm, unfortunately.

Indeed, this eclectic manner is intrinsically a source of (potential) inconsistency, by not conforming to previous attitudes, meanings, and practice. Yet, this disruption of 'conceptual consensus' by forcing the re-examination of assumptions and meanings, leads to a better understanding of mechanisms underlying the way CPR's function. The challenge eclecticism poses is twofold: one, the theoretical and methodological outline of such an approach has to be rigorous and the selection of various concepts and methods, as well as their interpretation, explained; and two, the relevance of the results (be they descriptive or quantitative) derived from such a method will have to face criticism within competing theoretical frameworks. This could lead to their being discarded as populist/ political arguments.

The challenge lies in transforming this practice from threat to tool by identifying areas in which controversies and knowledge gaps exist, in order to convey reality more clearly, develop more consistent theory, and avoid that each of us is “partly in the right” while all are “in the wrong”.

amarin@student.nlh.no

CPR FORUM RESPONSE

Multiple Routes to Conceptual Consistency

Nirmal Sengupta

Visiting Professor, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, former Director, Madras Institute of Development Studies.

Yes, we need some degree of conceptual consistency to communicate and make sense of our findings. Terms and concepts used in a theory must be well defined, leaving little confusion. Mathematics excels in this area. A definition in mathematics can use only those other terms that are already defined. Yet, in this rigorous exercise, mathematicians eventually reach a stage, where certain terms cannot be further defined. Individuals understand ‘primitive terms’ privately, as something out there. Still, terms and concepts in mathematics are shared with little confusion.

Conceptual clarity in mathematics owes to the method of definition, one that builds from the basics. In CPR studies, conceptualisation of common property was obtained in the same way, by building from primitive terms like excludability and subtractability. Primitive terms and notions are limited; one may not find a suitable one for a concept, in several disciplines. Those used in the definition of common property were essentially terms borrowed from Law. While congratulating Poteete for drawing attention to a vital issue of analysis, I also record my point of difference. Refinement of concepts within a discipline may assist development of concepts and consensus within another discipline. Participation of scholars from many different disciplines is an asset for attaining conceptual clarity, not a source of confusion.

Construction of definitions from the basic concepts is a must. But is this the only way to arrive at consensus? Different terms follow different trajectories in the process of attaining clarity. I will explain it by analysing the likely

course for a few terms that Poteete cites, terms that feature prominently in current debates, and yet are used to refer to very different things.

Conceptualisation of community has a very long history, dating back to late nineteenth century, e.g. Toennies’ distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). By now we have a rich body of definitions in sociology, trying to catch up with increasing complexities of real communities. CPR studies will benefit in this area from conceptual works using sociological understanding.

Participation is a different kind of concept. It is a primitive term that exists there, and range from ‘short public meetings to describe official policies’ to ‘repeated meetings with local residents to discern local concerns and develop strategies for addressing them through local initiative’. For pragmatic purpose nominal participation may be excluded from the technical meaning of the term. This would require a convention. Forests for example, are defined as those with some minimum crown cover etc. following conventions adopted by agencies like International Geosphere Biosphere Project or FAO.

Conceptualising plurality as a unity is an altogether different kind of challenge. Cantor named it a ‘set’. Mathematicians found that there are two ways of specifying a set. One is listing of all elements and the other is by its characteristic property: as $\{1, 2, 3, 4 \dots 9\}$ or as $\{x: x \text{ is all single digit positive integers}\}$. The second approach cannot be used in such cases where there is no readily identifiable characteristic property, e.g. for a set $\{1, 27, 31, 104, 9\}$. The people or the knowledge referred to as indigenous can be enlisted with some precision. But there is no readily identifiable characteristic property of this set, i.e. a property which is satisfied by each deserving community or knowledge and by none else. Complete listing is the only way to avoid confusion until we find an alternative term that fits the history and description of just these objects, people and knowledge but none else.

Meanings of terms change over time. Linguists identify various ways of occurrence of such changes.

Globalization is a changing concept. Apart from its dictionary meaning it has also a popular connotation - Scholte noted as many as five in the common usage of the term. The connotation of globalization may, in due course, become its meaning (denotation). The process of evolution is spontaneous and conscious efforts may not make much difference.

One size does not fit all. We have to be open to varieties of approaches. Besides, some changes are spontaneous. Wherever possible, initiatives must be taken to attain conceptual clarity. Add to it the watchdog duty. New entities that would dilute concepts gaining no analytical strength by sharing CPR platform, may seek access. Analytical work preventing such entry would favour conceptualisation. Few of us had noticed the inconsistency in ‘information commons’ before Prof. Poteete made it clear.

nsengupta@igidr.ac.in

CPR FORUM RESPONSE

Moving Beyond Case Studies

Heidi Wittmer

**Center for Environmental Research (UFZ),
Leipzig, Germany**

In using theme 5 of the 10th Biennial Meeting of the IASCP (August 2004) as a starting point for her commentary, Prof. Poteete points out that there must be agreement on concepts before methodological innovation can take place. Theme 5 has the goal to explore two directions for future research within IASCP: Analytical tools and theoretical questions. I would like to draw attention back to the underlying purpose of this theme. In my opinion, both point to areas where IASCP still has as yet unrealized potentials.

The core message of theme 5 is to move “beyond case studies” that have dominated IASCP’s discussion and have been extremely helpful in discovering relevant issues, amplifying the debate and understanding mechanisms, especially on how collective action works at the community level. However, as the overall theme of the Conference suggests, in the context of global transition there is a need to shift the analytical focus from the internal structures and processes of communities to their relations with other actors and institutions – state agencies at the different levels, NGOs and the private sector. The emerging debate on governance implies such a change in perspective. The state is no longer to be considered only as an “external factor” in analyzing the management of common-pool resources, it is rather the interplay of different actors in decision-making and implementation, which needs to come into the focus of

the analysis. Why is this debate helpful? By focusing on the interaction of communities, the state, NGOs and the private sector, contested concepts such as legitimacy, participation, indigenous rights, decentralization, globalization and community can be explored from different perspectives. Even though considerable advances have been made in analyzing the relations between communities and the state, especially with regard to co-management in the fishery and forestry sectors, we still lack a consistent understanding of the role of communities within new decision-making arrangements, on the legitimacy of alternative decision-making processes, and on how institutions for sustainability can be created at the regional, national and international level.

In view of such a shift in the analytical focus, theoretical concepts and analytical tools that have not yet been fully explored in commons studies offer a new explanatory potential. In analyzing diverse management arrangements, Transaction Costs Economics can help to explain what governance structures between the state, communities and other actors are comparatively more efficient, depending on the type of resource and the transactions involved. Despite some applications especially to co-management, more empirical work, especially in different resource systems and contexts, is required to further the debate. Transaction Costs Economics is just one example. A distinctive advantage of IASCP is its interdisciplinary composition, which makes it possible to bring explanatory approaches of different disciplines together. Concepts of legal pluralism, constitutional law and deliberative democracy are other examples of approaches that can offer fresh insights for debated issues of stakeholder involvement in public decision-making. The increasing relevance of multi-stakeholder decision-structures in fields where decisions are complex and characterized by uncertainty also calls for the development of decision-support tools. Agent-based modeling and participatory multi-criteria decision support tools are promising examples.

IASCP seems to me an ideal forum for a critical debate on the relations between communities, the state and other actors in the context of global transition – a forum where analytical concepts and tools are also used to identify problems created by hierarchies and power relations at different levels, such as problems of elite capture in devolution processes and questions of legitimacy with regard to decisions that have global consequences. This, I think, will place concepts like

participation and community in a broader context and might contribute to solve some of the issues with an ambiguous or uncritical use of concepts that Amy Poteete has pointed out in her contribution.

For further reading:

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Special Issue of Land Use Policy (forthcoming): New Strategies for Resolving Environmental Conflicts: Potentials for Combining Participation and Multi-criteria Analysis.

Heidi.Wittmer@ufz.de

CPR FORUM RESPONSE

Conceptual Consistency to Conceptual Clarity: The situating of concepts and terms for analytical strength.

Robin Roth

Clark University, Graduate School of Geography

Prof. Amy Poteete reminds us of the importance of conceptual consistency, both for the past and the future of CPR theory and practice. In my response, however, I explore in more depth the equal importance of conceptual inconsistency for CPR theory and practice. In the end, I argue for conceptual clarity as opposed to conceptual consistency.

Recognition of conceptual inconsistency can be useful in that it promotes conversation and debate, and it allows us to question the differences in how we employ certain terms and concepts. Prof. Poteete names disciplinary divisions, the politics of policy and the rise of new debates as three factors that contribute to conceptual inconsistency. One that she does not mention is the vastly different cultural and linguistic contexts within which common property terms and concepts are employed.

Researchers and practitioners who have faced the challenge of translating concepts between languages know how difficult it is to find the 'right word' in a language other than the one they were speaking when originally introduced to the concept. Furthermore, researchers working across language and culture also know how a satisfying conversation can ensue when trying to understand how a concept can be expressed in a different language and cultural context. For instance,

when working in Northern Thailand I had illuminating and lively discussions about the concepts of 'nature' and 'conservation'. I spoke with many people, all of whom were connected in various ways to the establishment of a national park, about how such concepts are treated differently by rural farmers, NGO staff and forestry officials and how they are interpreted differently in the English, Thai and Karen languages. Needless to say the Thai forestry officials meant something quite different by the use of 'nature' than did the Karen farmers. Without such a discussion, my analysis would have made incorrect assumptions and would have missed significant differences in the conceptualization of 'nature' and 'conservation' that helped me to understand the conflict around the park in a new way.

I am wary of advocating conceptual consistency, at least of the kind that seeks to determine fixed definitions for terms and concepts. Such complete conceptual consistency seeks to remove the context within which the term is being used, a move I believe to be dangerous and potentially harmful. What would be the result of defining 'nature' once and for all, regardless of context? Or worse, believing the concept is clear and thus not bothering to ask the "what do you mean by that?" question. Furthermore, the very different cultural, linguistic and political contexts in which researchers and practitioners operate render the search for consensus improbable at best. So instead of advocating for conceptual consistency, I advocate for conceptual clarity – a move that encourages the investigation into, and situating of, our concepts and terms. This self-reflective situating could serve to encourage the kind of conversation and debate that Prof. Poteete agrees is important for our learning, while making the meanings and assumptions of our work more visible. Such a step strengthens our analytical capability.

At the beginning of her article, Prof. Poteete states that "methodological innovation can improve analytical leverage only if there is some degree of agreement on concepts." While it is tempting to believe that theory can only be built on the fixed building blocks of agreed-upon concepts, I would like to suggest that the clarification of concepts be part of our analysis – not a priori to it. New methodological tools and approaches can help us in our search for conceptual clarity and should not be saved for a future (fictional) moment after consistency has been achieved. In my own work, I combined participatory mapping exercises, GPS, and GIS with observation, interviews, focus groups and surveys, so as to uncover

conceptual inconsistency and explore conceptual contradictions. Methodological innovation and triangulation can encourage a researcher to see a phenomenon through a number of lenses and makes it possible to reveal the different uses of a concept at play in any one common property scenario.

Situating and contextualizing our concepts and terms through the use of multiple methods, new and old, allows us to reveal and investigate conceptual inconsistencies. A self-reflective situating of concepts allows us to move towards more clarity in our writing and theorizing but does not obscure the very important linguistic, cultural and political contexts within which we employ common property concepts and terms.

rroth@clarku.edu

CPR FORUM

“The Blind Men and the Elephant” ***(a poem on disciplinary fragmentation and conceptual inconsistency)***

*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
‘God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!’*

*The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, ‘Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ’tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!’*

*The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
‘I see,’ quoth he, ‘the Elephant
Is very like a snake.’*

*The Fourth reached out his eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
‘What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,’ quoth he;
‘’Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!’*

*The Fifth who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: ‘E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most:
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!’*

*The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
‘I see,’ quoth he, ‘the Elephant
Is very like a rope!’*

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!
So, oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!*

John Godfrey Saxe, “The Blind Men and the Elephant: A Hindoo Fable,” *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, selected by Hazel Felleman. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1936.

Originally from a Hindu fable which occurs in the *Udana*, a Canonical Hindu Scripture.

Thanks to Andrei Marin for providing this poem.



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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Call for Proposals for Conference Side Events

Send Letters and Announcements to Doug Wilson, Editor, CPR Digest, The Institute for Fisheries Management, North Sea Center, PO Box 104, DK-9850, Hirtshals, Denmark. dw@ifm.dk Tel: 45 98 94 28 55 Fax:: 45 98 94 42 68

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For questions about IASCP papers and research, contact Charlotte Hess, Information Officer, IASCP, 513 N. Park, Bloomington, IN 47408 USA iascp@indiana.edu Tel: 01-812-855-9636 Fax:: 01-812-855-3150

Before, during and after the Conference, we hope that a number of organizations / institutions will be interested in holding meetings or side events on a variety of CPR-related themes, all of which will fuel discussion during the main conference proceedings. The aim is for these additional spaces to provide a more flexible and open format for discussion and help supplement the main working (panel) sessions that will be going on throughout the conference week.

Such side events could include the organization of workshops to take place on the day before the conference officially begins (Monday, August 9), or round tables, seminars and forums that would be given slots during the 3 days of conference panel sessions (Tuesday, August 10, Wednesday, August 11 & Friday, August 13). Thursday, August 12, is being reserved for fieldtrips out to local Oaxacan communities.

As such, we invite any organizations or institutions interested in organizing a side event, to submit a proposal. We are open to any proposal that, as mentioned, is on a CPR-related theme and will help aid discussion during the main conference proceedings. These proposals will go before review by the IASCP 2004 Conference Committee, and the most appropriate and thought-provoking will be selected. We will provide a suitable space and time slot for selected side events, along with tables, chairs, projectors and other basic equipment. The organization/institution in question, however, will be left to run and coordinate the event as they see fit.

To give you some idea of the length of these events: the workshops on the first day (August 9) can either be half day or full day affairs, whilst side events during the three days of the conference proper (August 10, 11 & 13) will be given 90 or 120 minute slots (early morning, midday or in the evening, thereby not clashing with the scheduled panel sessions). There would also be the opportunity for side events (such as forums) to take place on August 13, the day after the conference has officially ended. This could provide a useful opportunity for groups to discuss important CPR issues in light of the discussions that have taken place and lessons learned during the conference week.

Proposals for side events (no more than 500 words) should be sent to the Conference Committee at iascp04@indiana.edu by the latest **April 1st, 2004**, and should include details such as intended capacity, what, if any, special equipment will be required, and if you would like the event to be open to all conference delegates (or if participation will be by invitation or reservation only).

Please send a Word or Word-Perfect file as an e-mail attachment **ALONG WITH THE FOLLOWING FORM:**

IASCP 2004 Side Events Proposal Form

Name of Institution

Person in charge of organizing side event

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The Commons in an Age of Global Transition: Challenges, Risks and Opportunities

The 10th Biennial Meeting of the IASCP

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The theme and title for the conference is “*The Commons in an Age of Global Transition: Challenges, Risks and Opportunities*”. As such, IASCP 2004 seeks to stimulate further discussion upon many of the themes that were raised during the 2002 conference in Zimbabwe, where “Globalisation” was the central focus.

Ten sub-themes for the conference have been suggested below. The goal is to foster deeper discussions across all themes, including the analysis of institutional frameworks, the importance and influence of markets and public policy-making, and the interrelationships between policies and institutions at local, regional, national and international levels within the context of global transition.

Please note that broader papers covering topics that cut across more than one of the ten conference sub-themes are also welcome.

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